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STRUCTURAL AND COGNITIVE POETICS: A COMPARISON

1. Introduction

Literary analysis that pays greater attention to the text itself than to more or less intuitive ideas about its meaning is a fairly recent invention. Its origin goes back to the famous *Cours de Linguistique Générale* published in 1916, three years after Ferdinand de Saussure's death. The book became an inspiration for specialists in literature convinced that literary studies should be scientific rather than essayistic in nature and who strived to provide literary scholars with tools that would enable them to be more scientific. These theoreticians of literature wanted to analyse texts having at their disposal objective, verifiable methods. Thus, the concept of structure was born, a notion that stems from the belief that literature is a system, because it stems from language, which is also an organized entity. As Sturrock (2003: 99) observes: "literary structuralism is not the novelty which its opponents claim it to be. It is, rather, the latest, unusually sophisticated stage (...) form of literary criticism that has existed since Aristotle." This way of approaching literature, highly sophisticated indeed, had been developing largely unchallenged until the last decade of the 20th century, when a new school was born, namely, cognitive poetics. Although again not quite revolutionary and openly acknowledging its resemblance with structuralist poetics (Gavins and Steen 2003: 5–8), cognitive poetics offers a markedly distinct way of approaching the text based on cognitive linguistics, itself a more recent development in the study of language.

Although the sources of inspirations for the two approaches to literary texts are different, not to say antithetical, it seems that in many respects they arrive at quite similar results, even if obtained within distinct paradigms. In this article, I take a closer look at what exactly the differences between structuralist and cognitive poetics are and try to establish whether we can really say

that cognitive linguistics shows any signs of development compared with its predecessor. I will try to compare some selected aspects of the linguistic foundations of the two schools, the way they treat meaning and finally, moving from theory to practice, I will compare the plot-analysis method as presented by Vladimir Propp (1928/1984) in his famous *Morphology of the Folk Tale* with the schema and scenario theory in Peter Stockwell's (2006) rendering.

2. Linguistic foundations

As already mentioned, the cornerstone of structuralism is *Cours de Linguistique Générale*, presenting Ferdinand de Saussure's seminal lectures on linguistics. It introduces the now widely known division of language into *langue* and *parole*, defining the former as "a system, an institution, a set of interpersonal rules and norms" and the latter as "the actual manifestation of the system in speech and writing" (Culler 1989: 8). This division, later renamed by Noam Chomsky as *competence* and *performance*, basically corresponds to the idea that there is a coherent, rule-governed whole underlying all actual manifestations of language and consequently, also of literature. As a result, the aim of the literary critic is to look beyond the surface and search for invariants, regularities and general rules. It is assumed that literature (and entire culture) is, to use de Saussure's nomenclature, a *signifiant*, a semiotic device, a form by means of which a given meaning is expressed. It is also important that, from a structuralist standpoint, the form is a purely arbitrary construct as there is usually (onomatopoeic words being a notable exception) no natural relationship between the form of a word and its denotation. For example, what is referred to in English with the word *butterfly*, in Polish is referred to with *motyl* and in Finnish with *perhonen*.

Cognitive linguistics takes a fundamentally different perspective on language. Its main tenet is that all language is context-dependent, where *context* is understood as the entire extra-textual reality. As Stockwell (2006: 2) puts it:

> We think in forms that we do and we say things in the ways that we do, because we are all roughly human-sized containers of air and liquid with our main receptors at the top of our bodies. Our minds are *embodied* not just literally but also figuratively, finally clearing away the mind-body distinction of much philosophy (...).

What is meant by this is the belief that all utterances, from single words to novels, are the expression of the way we perceive and organise our perception of the world in which we live, which in turn cannot be separated from our somatic experience. Thus, while structuralist linguistics looks up to mathematics as a source of inspiration, cognitive linguistics is mostly influenced by psychol-

ogy. This results in a less formal approach to language, which, according to the opponents of cognitivism, diminishes the scientific value of this paradigm. Nevertheless, cognitivism opens up the possibility to investigate a wider range of phenomena which have hitherto evaded analysis. This may be seen, among other things, in the case of meaning-analysis.

3. The problem of meaning in structuralism and cognitive linguistics

To illustrate the structuralist approach to meaning, let us take a closer look at the theory proposed by Algirdas J. Greimas (Culler 1989: 75–96). Striving to provide a tool for semantic analysis, Greimas posited that every lexeme has an invariant core, which is established by extracting the common features, or "the essence" of the word present in all its possible readings in a given corpus. All changes in meaning result from attaching to this core contextually-conditioned features called *semes*. Roughly speaking, a *seme* is an attribute chosen from two opposite features such as [male] vs. [female], or [good] vs. [bad]. The semantic analysis consists of two steps, namely, identifying the core and deciding what kind of attribute is used in a given context of use. For example, consider the following pair of sentences:

(1) The dog barked at me.
(2) The man barked at me.

The core meaning of *to bark* can be determined as 'a sharp, vocal noise' and the *semes* in question as consisting of the attributes [animal] and [human], respectively. This might seem a very neat tool for semantic analysis, but as Culler (1989) points out, it has two major disadvantages. Firstly, the analysis requires compiling a list of all possible attributes and arranging them in a 'semetic' way and, secondly, it simply does not work, even in the case of the lexical items provided by Greimas. In his critique of Greimas's theory, Culler (1989: 78) provides the following example from French:

(3) La police aboie après le criminal.
the police barks after the criminal
'The police chase the criminal.'

(3) does not mean that the police bark after (*aboie après*) a criminal, but that they "chase him with the tenacity of hounds that have taken the scent and are in full cry" (Culler 1989: 78). It becomes a really arduous task to formulate in a formal fashion the link between 'barking', 'speaking loudly' and 'pursuing'.

In fact, "the meaning is [...] constituted in deviation from the listed lexical features" and "semantics [should] be able to account for the deviations and transitions" (Fokkema and Kunne-Ibsch 1979: 73).

Cognitive linguistics seems capable of explaining such changes in a more regular fashion, thanks to the radial model of meaning (Tabakowska 1995: 46–56). This model is based on the idea that metaphor is a basic cognitive tool, allowing people to organise and classify new experience. Thus, the lexical item *key* understood both as 'the key that opens the front door' and as 'the key to the exercises' need not be treated as two separate lexemes, but as two senses of a single lexeme which are related by metaphorical extension. Similarly, the above-mentioned examples of 'barking' can be analysed either as involving a simple metaphorical extension, or, alternatively, as resulting from a metonymical extension: as the activity of barking is very often connected with the activity of chasing, the mental proximity may be the vehicle of extension of meaning. And although this method rules out the possibility of formulaic description, it shows that different meanings of a word are not accidental, but can be traced down by means of cognitive tools.

3.1. Comparing the approaches: the analysis of myths

Having briefly examined the theoretical background of the two schools of thought, let us now have a look at how theory influences practical analysis. As mentioned in section 1, the objects of comparison are Propp's (1928/1984) structural approach to the analysis of the myth, and the schema and scenario theory proposed by Stockwell (2006). This choice is motivated by the fact that both theories have received extensive coverage and, more importantly, because they seem to display a considerable level of convergence.

In his approach to the structure of folk tales, Propp (1928/1984) claimed that every folk tale is composed of the so-called *functions* (cf. also Fokkema and Kunne-Ibsch 1979: 61–64). According to him, a function is "an act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of action." Such functions "serve as stable, constant elements in a tale, independent of how and by whom they are fulfilled" and as such "constitute the fundamental components of a tale"(Propp 1928/1984: 21). For example, the sentences in (4) and (5) can be represented on a more abstract level of analysis as shown in (6):

(4) The old man gives Sučenko a horse; the horse carries Sučenko to another kingdom.
(5) A king gives an eagle to a hero; the eagle carries the hero away to another kingdom.

(6) Someone [1] gives a hero [2] a magical agent [3], which carries him away.

In (6), [1], [2] and [3] can be filled with different elements (or, to usePropp's nomenclature: dramatis personae) which do not change the whole structure of a folk tale. However, according to Propp, the number of such functions is limited to thirty one altogether. Crucially, their sequence in a fairy tale is fixed. The main disadvantage of this approach is that by claiming that this function-division is applicable only to folk tales and not to literature in general, Propp drastically narrows the area to which the method could be applied. In addition, this analysis does not seem to include all the elements important for the creation of a given situation. Propp mentions only dramatis personae, or the actors, and pays little attention to defining the role of the context and/or objects involved. Only dramatis personae find their way to the description of the narrative event. Furthermore, the approach leads to certain problems with classification. According to Propp (1928/1984: 22), "tales with identical functions can be considered as belonging to one type." At the same time, he mentions that there is practically no variation as to the sequence of functions in a tale. While this may be true with regard to the folk tale, the question arises whether it could be applied to other types of writing without running the risk of multiplying the literary divisions ad infinitum.

Cognitive poetics, in turn, provides literary scholars with a tool of greater flexibility, namely, schemata. Not only do these tools maintain what is valuable in Propp's theory, but at the same time they open new possibilities. In cognitive linguistics, a *schema* is "a schematised representation of detailed experiences" (Stockwell 2006: 8). What this means is that every successful or unsuccessful operation in our life is classified and organized so that the next time we encounter a similar situation, we can act without undue hesitation. Stockwell (2006: 10–11) explains the reasons for the success of the schema theory to preserve what is valuable in Propp's analysis in the following way:

> The framework includes a set of categories to operationalise the details of a schema. There are various kinds of 'slots' that are associated with any particular script and are assumed to be in operation when the schema is going. These are 'props', 'participants', 'entry conditions', 'results' and the 'sequence of events.'

As we can clearly see, there is a striking similarity between the two theories. In both of them we have certain 'slots' which can be filled with different attributes. Where, then, does the advantage of the schema theory over that of Propp's lie? The answer to this question lies in the dynamic character of schemata, which is necessitated by the fact that in our life we usually en-

counter many similar, yet distinct situations. If schemata were deprived of their dynamic nature, there would be no sense in having them, because each new element would lead to creating a completely new schema and obviously the human brain aims at simplicity and economy.[1]

According to cognitive scholars, to protect itself from such inefficiency, the human brain has come up with the option of *schema refreshment*. This feature allows schemas to modify their internal structure rather than construct themselves anew when faced with a new element. With such a reservation made, schemata at first glance seem to be an ideal tool for literary analysis. However, this is not so obvious, because as Stockwell (2006:11) rightly remarks, "the schema theory is based on commonality, whereas high quality literature tends to be based on uniqueness." Schema refreshment fills the rift between the two tendencies, showing that it is precisely thanks to schemata that we can accommodate new experience, not only in real life, but also within the narrative.

This point can be illustrated with the stages of reception of *The Trial* by Franz Kafka. From the very first words the reader's interest is piqued by the fact that K, the main hero, has been accused without an obvious reason. This is a very clear example of a schema, the schema of LEGAL PROCEDURE. Our experience tells us that in order for somebody to be accused there must exist an entry condition of the law being broken by the person in question. It turns out that one of the reasons why the reader pursues the narrative with increasing interest is the desire to understand the destabilisation of the above-mentioned schema. But the narrative itself is insufficient for refreshing the schema. In order to resolve the cognitive impasse, the reader must resort to his or her knowledge of the surrounding world and try to cope with literary nonsense. It is this flexibility and multi-dimensionality of our literary competence that enables the reader to refresh the schema as well as to create a new one.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have demonstrated that structuralist and cognitive poetics seem to have a lot in common despite having completely divergent linguistic foundations. The reason for the similarities seems to be that in striving to free literary analysis from wishy-washy essayism, both perspectives employ formal linguistics tools, thus taking a scientific approach to the study of literature.

[1] For example, there would be no one 'restaurant schema,' but rather a whole set of them, including schemas for restaurants with spoons, restaurants without spoons, restaurants with and without tables, etc.

However, this does not mean that cognitive poetics should be viewed merely as a structuralism relabelled. The fact that cognitive linguistics is cognitive has profound implications, because it allows for a more flexible, yet very regular and coherent description of phenomena which have hitherto remained outside the scope of traditional approaches.

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